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AUTHOR Kitao, S. Kathleen
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ABSTRACT

The question of why some second language learners are more successful than others is examined from two different approaches. One looks at the social distance between the speakers of the target language and the learner's native language and, on one hand, the resulting learner and target-language-speaker attitudes and, on the other hand, the type and amount of input that the learner receives. The second approach takes the perspective of the differences between first- and second-language learners and between the processes by which language is learned. With regard to the "social distance" approach, the following aspects of English language learning are discussed: pidgins and pidginization; pidginization and second language acquisition; depidginization (gradual approximation of standard English); input and second language acquisition; foreigner talk; and the concept and role of social distance. In relation to the "fundamental distance" hypothesis, one researcher's findings about differences in adult and child language learning processes (lack of guaranteed success, variation in degree of success, variation in goals, fossilization, importance of instruction, and role of affective factors) are highlighted, and the strong influence of first language knowledge and general problem-solving systems is emphasized. The two approaches are found to be different but not contradictory, and further research is recommended. (MSE)

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S. Kathleen Kitao

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Variations in Success in Acquiring a Second Language: Two Approaches

S. Kathleen Kitao

The assertion that second languge learners vary in their success in acquiring the second language, and that most of them do not completely master the second language, is so widely accepted it has not been considered necessary to demonstrate it with formal research (Bley-Vroman, 1989). However, the reasons for this variation are much more controversial. While there has been much research on the method of instruction in looking at this question, it is also necessary to look at the nature of language and the processes of both first and second language learning. In this paper, I will discuss two approaches to the question of why some language learners are more successful than others. One approach looks at the social distance between the speakers of the target language and the learners' language and, on one hand, the resulting attitudes both on the part of learners and speakers of the target language and, on the other hand, the type and amount of input the learner receives. The other approach looks at the differences between first and second language learners and between the processes by which language is learned.

Social Distance and Second Language Acquisition

One approach to the question of why most learners fail to completely master a second language looks at the problem from the point of view of social distance. Briefly, from this perspective it is maintained that the social distance between first and second language speakers influences the type and amount of input the second language speakers receive, their attitudes toward the second language, and the amount of motivation they have for learning the second language. These, in turn, influence the level of proficiency that second language speakers achieve. Some useful concepts in looking at this approach are pidginization, interlanguage, and foreigner talk. In this section, I will discuss each of these concepts and the theories about their relationships to social distance.

Pidgins and Pidginization

Pidgins and pidginization have, until relatively recently, been considered below the notice of serious linguistic study. However, many linguists have come to realize that pidgins and the processes by which they are formed are interesting both in and of themselves and because of the insights that they offer into language acquisition processes (Hall, 1966).

Pidginzation is the process of simplification and reduction of language that occurs when people who do not share the same language come in contact (Todd and Hancock, 1986). In the pidginization process, a language learner makes use of limited input to learn a language, the result of which is severely reduced in terms of lexicon and grammatical complexity in comparison to the target language(s)

(Anderson, 1983). In some cases, the resulting language becomes standardized. This standardized language is called a pidgin. A pidgin is a language with severely reduced grammar and vocabulary used for communication between two or more people who have no common language (Hall, 1966). A pidgin language is the native language of none of its speakers (though it may be based on the native language of one or more of the speakers). Pidgin languages are used in cases of limited contact for specific, narrow purposes (Anderson, 1983). Pidgins develop in multilingual settings under conditions of major population displacement. They are spoken by adults who are already fluent in one or more other languages, which they use for other purposes. Pidgins are used only in contexts where there are no other common languages available to the participants.

Characteristics. The structure of a pidgin is simplified in comparison to the language(s) on which it is based. Certain morphological markers, such as plurals, gender markers, and tense markers, are omitted, along with prepositions, copulas and other function words. Irregularity is reduced, and vocabulary is limited and usually drawn from the socially dominant language. Pidgins also often use one form for a number of different purposes, e.g., "no" for all negations.

Pidginization and Second Language Acquistion

There has been considerable discussion in the field of linguistics about how pidginization is related to the "ordinary" second language acquisition process (Anderson, 1983). Some scholars treat pidginization as a social phenomenon while others treat it as a cognitive phenomenon, and it is from this difference that the two major approaches to pidginization arise. For the scholars who treat pidginization as a

social phenomenon, pidginization is a process that results in the formation of a pidgin language. Anderson refers to this as P-s. P-s is not just one learner's approximation of the target language but a standardized version used by people of different languages to communicate among themselves.

In contrast, if pidginization is considered as an individual psycholinguistic process, which Anderson refers to as P-i, it is the process that goes on in the brain of a language learner that results either in the use of a pidgin language or a simplified use of the target language in an individual acquisitional framework. In other words, P-i takes place whenever a learner begins acquiring a second or foreign language, unless or until the learner begins to speak a version of the language similar to that of native speakers (NSs). (Some scholars maintain that there are elements of pidginization in first language acquisition as well [Anderson, 1983], but that is beyond the scope of this paper.)

The P-i that takes place in ordinary second language acquisition is sometimes called *interlanguage*. Interlanguage is defined as the temporary, changing, rule-governed system of language constructed from the input that the learner receives in the target language. The characteristics of interlanguage resemble those of pidgins. For example, interlanguage is simplified in comparison to the NS' language; certain morphological markers are omitted as are some function words; irregularity is reduced, vocabulary is limited, and one form is often used for a number of different purposes (Anderson, 1983). While there are differences between pidgins and interlanguage, their similarities, from a P-i approach, may shed light on the process of language acquistion. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the P-i

approach to piaginization will be used, and pidgin and interlanguage will be treated together.

Depidginization

If speakers of, for example, an English-based pidgin have continued contact with NSs of English, the speakers of pidgin may eventually learn to speak English in a way similar to the way native speakers speak it (Schumann, 1978). By the same token, a student of English may gradually learn to speak English more like a native speaker. More morphological markers are used, as well as function words, and all-purpose forms are replaced by differentiated forms. This process of producing a closer and closer approximation of the target language is called depidginization. The study of this depidginization process leads to the obvious question of why some learners progress from pidginized language to depidginization and others do not. As montioned above, one answer proposed by theorists working in the area of pidginization is related to the concept of social distance. In order to understand the role that social distance might play in second language acquisition, it is necessary to understand the role that input is believed to play in the second language acquistion process and the characteristics of the language directed at second language speakers.

Input and Second Language Acquisition

Input plays an important role in second language acquisition. It is through input that language learners form hypotheses about the language (Krashen and Seliger, 1975). Therefore, the characteristics of the input that they receive will influence the characteristics of the

language that they acquire. In this section, I will discuss foreigner talk, its characteristics, the traits that elicit it, and its influence on language acquisition.

Foreigner Talk. The term *foreigner talk* (FT) was first used by Ferguson (1971) to describe speech used with foreigners perceived to be deficient in proficiency in the target language. Some characteristics of FT in English that Ferguson (1975) described included absence of the copula (be verb); absence of certain morphological markers (e.g., possessives, past tense, and 3rd person -s); and presence of words that do not usually appear in English spoken to other native speakers (e.g., *savvy* as a verd and *heap* [meaning much or very]). Other characteristics include of full forms instead of contractions; short sentences; repetition of words; selection of one all purpose form (e.g., *me* used for *I, me, mine,* and *my*); and feedback devices, such as tag questions (Ferguson and DeBose, 1977). FT may differ from what is acceptable in standard language.

Some theorists have made a distinction between FT and what is referred to as foreigner register (FR) (Arthur, Weiner, Culver, Lee, and Thomas, 1979) or grammatical foreigner talk (Long, 1981). FR was defined as a simplified register which follows the rules of the standard language, used by NSs in speaking to NNSs of the language. The difference between FT and FR is that FR follows the rules of the standard language and FT does not. Characteristics of FR that have been identified include use of high frequency vocabulary and simplified grammatical structure, and avoidance of idioms (Gass and Varonis, 1985).

It has been hypothesized that an NNS's linguistic insufficiency triggers FT or FR (Freed, 1981), or more accurately, the NS's perception

of the NNS's linguistic insufficiency. In listening to and interacting with the NNS, the NS forms an impression about whether the NNS can understand native speaker register (NSR) (Gass and Varonis, 1985; Schinke-Llano, 1983). If the NS forms the impression that the NNS will not understand NSR, he/she may use FT or FR to make messages easier for the NNS to understand (Ferguson, 1971), i.e., to lighten the NNS's interactional burden.

NNS traits that have been posited to trigger FR or FT include pronunciation, grammatical proficiency, vocabulary, fluency (ability to speak smoothly, without unnecessary pauses), demonstration of lack of comprehension, and an interaction among these (Gass and Varonis, 1985).

NS traits may also affect the use of FR or FT. However, while numerous studies look at the effects that NNS traits have on use of FT or FR, I could not find any that systematically looked at the traits of the NS. One possible factor is familiarity with non-native speech (Gass and Varonis, 1985). While Gass and Varonis do not try to explain this relationship, one possible explanation is that familiarity with non-native speech may make the NS more familiar with possible simplification strategies, which he/she may put to use in FR or FT. Another explanation is that the NS assumes that the NNS can comprehend what he/she can produce, and bases FR or FT on utterances that NNSs produce.

Another possible variable is experience dealing with NNSs (Hatch, Shapira, and Gough, 1978). A person who has had experience interacting with NNSs may be more sensitive to their areas of difficulty and have well-developed simplification and clarification strategies for dealing with those difficulties.

Social Distance

Schumann (1978) discussed the concept of social distance in relation to language acquistion. He isolated eight factors that influence language acquisition of second language learning groups by either inhibiting or promoting social solidarity. He posed these issues in the form of eight questions:

1. In relation to the target language group, is the second language learning group politically, culturally, technically or economically dominant, nondominant, or subordinate?
2. Is the integration pattern of the second language learning group assimilation (giving up their own culture to adopt these of the target language group), acculturation (adapting to the target language group but maintaining their own culture within their group) or preservation (rejecting the culture of the target language group while trying to maintain their own culture)?
3. What is the degree of the second language learning group's enclosure (maintenance of separate institutions [e. g., schools, churches, clubs], professions or trades, etc.)?
4. Is the second language learning group cohesive?
5. What is the size of the second language learning group?
6. Are the cultures of the two groups congruent (similar)?
7. What are the attitudes of the two groups toward each other?
8. What is the second language learning group's intended length of residence in the area?

These eight dimensions have a variety of effects on the opportunities and desires of the second language learning group for second language acquisition. If one or the other of the groups is dominant,

this may cause limited contact between the groups and therefore limited opportunity to acquire the target language. Among assimilation, acculturation, and preservation strategies, assimilation obviously offers the most opportunity for contact and preservation the least. High enclosure also impedes social contacts between the two groups, as do high cohesiveness in the second language learning group, large second language learning group size, negative attitude of one group toward the other, and short length of residence. Also, a second language learning group that is dominant, is preserving their own culture, is highly enclosed and highly cohesive, that has negative attitudes toward the target language group, or that intends to reside in the country for only a short time, may have little desire to the target language. Some of these dimensions must be looked at from the point of view of each group. For example, the second language learning group may desire to assimilate, but the target language group may oppose their assimilation, or vice versa.

Social Distance and FT

Schumann (1978) discussed the influence of these eight dimensions on the inclination and opportunity of the second language learning group to use the second language. However, these issues are also related to the use of FT. Ferguson believed that FT was intended to derogate the person it was addressed to. Valdman (1981) agreed and suggested that FT was also used to maintain social distance between NSs and NNSs considered socially inferior or subservient. It signals foreigners that their assimilation is not desirable in the host country; the NS recognizes that the mother tongue is the emblem of group membership and protects it from outsiders by presenting an im-

poverished variety. This denial of the opportunity of assimilating has the effect of reducing the foreign learner's motivation and fossilizing the foreigner's language at a highly deviant stage. If the target language group considers the second language group to be subordinate, they may not want them to assimilate into the target culture and may signal this with FT. If the second language learning group is cohesive, the target language group may view them with suspicion and dislike and, again, may signal their opposition to the group's assimilation by using FT.

As mentioned above, if a learner of a second language receives only FT as input, he/she is likely to learn to speak the target language just as he/she hears it. While this is not the only factor in the failure of language learners to develop beyond pidginized language, certainly it is one that bears investigation.

The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis

A different though not contradictory approach to why some language learners reach a limit in their mastery of the language was taken by Bley-Vroman (1989). He approached the problem by looking at the differences between the process of child language learning and adult second language learning. In the area of first language development, it has been hypothesized that children have a Universal Grammar, a set of abstract universal principles that account for similarities across languages. The Universal Grammar is made up of sets of parameters defining possible variations across languages, the setting of each parameter being determined by input. These parameters are instantiated through a set of domain specific procedures (Chomsky, 1981).

While many linguists and language teachers make the assumption that the process of first and second language learning are similar, Bley-Vroman argues that they are not. He discussed several obvious characteristics of adult language learning that are different from child language learning. They included:

1. A lack of guaranteed success. While normal children inevitably master their native language, the same cannot be said of adult language learners. Complete success in learning a foreign language is very rare. It is, in fact, so unusual the Selinker (1972) compared it to the "pathological" status of failures in first language acquisition.
2. Variation in degree of success. Adult language learners, in fact, vary greatly in their mastery of a second language, even if such factors as age, exposure, and instruction are held constant. Learners also vary in the nature of their success, that is, some learners are successful on one area of language learning but not another. Some learners develop fluency but not accuracy; others accuracy but not fluency.
3. Variation in goals. Second language learners also vary greatly in their goals for learning a second language. Some learners are satisfied with a pidginized version of the second language that is nevertheless communicatively useful. Others develop competence in just one area, for example, the skill necessary to deal with hotel guests. First language learners, in contrast, are "driven by the inexorable operation of the domain-specific language faculty" and "do not have the luxury of setting their own individual goals" (Bley-Vorman, 1989: 46).
4. Fossilization. Second language learners often reach a certain

stage of learning and find themselves unable, in spite of conscious efforts, to go further. This is a state Selinker (1972) referred to as *fossilization*. This phenomenon is sometimes observed in learners who have reached a level where their proficiency is useful communicatively, even though they have not reached native proficiency. Children, in contrast, pass through all stages of language learning and do not become fossilized.

5. Importance of instruction. The role of instruction in second language learning is unclear. There are serious difficuties inherent in studying a topic with so many uncontrollable variables, and the method of instruction is also an important variable. However, studies exist that show that instruction, as opposed to mere exposure to native speaker input, is important in adult second language learning. Child first language learning, in contrast, does not appear to require any formal instruction.
6. Role of affective factors. There is a consensus among second language acquisition researchers and language teachers that such factors as personality, motivation, attitude, and self-esteem play a part in second language learning, although the specific contributions of these factors and their exact relationship to second language learning is not at all clear. However, these do not appear to play a part in first language learning.

The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis suggests that adult language learners no longer have access to the Universal Grammar or the domain specific procedures used to instantiate it. Bley-Vroman formalized his discussion of these differences in the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis. This hypothesis states that differences between

adult and child language learning are internal (caused by differences in internal cognitive states, not external factors), linguistic (caused by changes in the language faculty specifically, not a general change in learning ability) and qualitative (not merely quantitative, in that the domain-specific acquisition system is unavailble, not just attenuated).

Bley-Vroman proposed, rather, that adults make use of their knowledge of their native language and of general problem-solving systems to learn a second language, pointing out that the characteristics of second language learning discussed above appear to be more similar to the learning of such skills as chess playing or playing a musical instrument than they are to first language learning. Bley-Vroman theorized that knowledge of the native language provides information about features of language, that is, the learner will expect a language to have a syntax, a lexicon divided into parts of speech, a system of morphology, and so on. This might be described as a schema for a language, that is, an organized generic knowledge structure composed of *slots* or *placeholders* for each component, with information about constraints on what can normally fill a particular slot and relationships among the slots (Anderson, 1978). Using this schema, a second language learner may, to some extent, reconstruct the Universal Grammar. This reconstruction may be both a hindrance and a help, since the learner may assume that some characteristics of the native language are universal, when, in fact, they aren't.

Bley-Vroman's hypothesis was supported by a study by Schachter (1989). Schachter studied proficient speakers of English as a second language from Korea, Indonesia, and China, using a grammar point that is different between Korean and English and partially different

between English and Chinese and English and Indonesian. Based on participants' judgments of grammatical sentences and violations, Schachter concluded that the results for the Korean participants clearly supported the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, though the results were less clear for Indonesian and Chinese particpants, whose languages partially overlap with English.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed two approaches to the question of why second language speakers vary widely in the proficiency that they achieve in a second language—a social distance approach and the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, two approaches that are different but not contradictory. More research is necessary to support or dispute these notions. In addition, further research is necessary to evaluate the effect that each approach might have on the teaching and learning of second languages.

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